

GENDER, RELIGION, AND SOCIOSPATIAL (IM)MOBILITIES: TOWARD AN INTERSECTIONAL FRAMEWORK FOR MUSLIM FEMALE SOLO TRAVEL

AFSANEH ROSTAMI and ALEXANDER TRUPP

With 1 figure and 2 tables

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Summary: This research proposes an intersectional framework for examining Muslim women's solo travel. Drawing from existing literature and using Iranian Muslim women as a case example, the study identifies ten key identity axes: gender, education, employment, nationality, religion, place, marital status, ethnicity, age, and race, discussing how these axes intersect to create compounded and context-specific barriers. The framework highlights unique constraints, such as the intersection of nationality and religion, which exposes women to Islamophobia and Iranophobia during international travel, and the intersection of gender and marital status, which reinforces patriarchal norms through legal restrictions. By offering a structured and context-specific approach, this research advances theoretical discussions on intersectionality in tourism and provides a foundation for future empirical studies to explore the diverse and nuanced experiences of Muslim female solo travelers.

Keywords: Intersectionality, Muslim female solo travelers, nationality, education, employment

1 Introduction

Female solo travellers are a growing segment in the tourism industry (ALONSO-VAZQUEZ et al. 2024), often describing their journeys as empowering and life-changing (NIKJOO et al. 2021). Despite this, women continue to face persistent gender-based constraints both before and during travel (WILSON & LITTLE 2005). These include domestic responsibilities and the risk of sexual harassment (SU & WU 2022, YANG 2021), which reflect broader patriarchal structures in society. However, much of the current research focuses on women from socioeconomically developed, liberal, and non-Muslim regions (ALONSO-VAZQUEZ et al. 2024, KHOO et al. 2025, WILSON & LITTLE 2005). In contrast, studies on Muslim women from conservative societies remain limited, despite the unique constraints they face.

This research is conceptual in nature and aims to develop a theoretical framework for understanding the constraints faced by Muslim female solo travelers, with a focus on Iranian women. Iranian women face a unique set of challenges shaped by patriarchal norms, restrictive legal frameworks, and geopolitical tensions, such as economic sanctions and Iranophobia, which intersect to limit their mobility and autonomy. Drawing on intersectionality theory, which examines how overlapping social identities, such as gender, religion, and class, shape experiences of discrimination (CRENSHAW 1991), the

study identifies ten key axes of identity and explores their dynamic interactions. By synthesizing existing literature, this framework provides a foundation for future empirical research and offers a structured approach to analyzing the intersectional dimensions of women's mobility.

The proposed framework contributes to the growing body of literature on intersectionality in tourism (MOONEY 2018, HIGGINS-DESBIOLLES 2020) and offers a structured approach for future empirical research. By focusing on Iranian women, the study highlights the unique socio-cultural, legal, and geopolitical barriers they face, while also providing insights that can be applied to other Muslim-majority contexts. While previous studies have explored the constraints faced by female solo travelers, particularly in relation to gender, nationality, and socio-cultural norms (e.g., WILSON & LITTLE 2005, SU & WU 2022, NIKJOO et al. 2021), this research advances the discussion by synthesizing these insights into a structured intersectional framework. The inclusion of the axis of nationality in conjunction with geopolitical tensions is overlooked in intersectionality studies, and highlights the specific context faced by Iranian women. By focusing on the dynamic interactions between these axes, the framework provides a novel lens for understanding the compounded and context-specific nature of constraints on Muslim female solo travelers. This conceptual framework



is intended to guide future empirical research and contribute to the growing body of literature on intersectionality in tourism.

Like most social phenomena, female solo travel is complex and informed by knowledge from various disciplines (JABAREEN 2009). Grounded in intersectionality, with attention to social identity and prior research, a systematic search was conducted using academic databases such as Scopus, Web of Science, and Google Scholar. Keywords such as *Muslim women travel*, *female solo travelers*, and *intersectionality in tourism* were used to identify international studies on Muslim women. Additional terms like *economic empowerment*, *women's outdoor leisure*, *mobility rights*, and *patriarchy* were combined with *Iran* to locate studies relevant to the Iranian context and highlight the significance of each identified axis (JABAREEN 2009).

2 Constraints on female solo travel: An intersectional perspective

Female solo travel has been widely studied as a transformative and empowering experience (ALONSO-VAZQUEZ et al. 2024, NIKJOO et al. 2021). However, solo travel also exposes women to pervasive gender-based constraints, such as safety concerns, societal expectations, and domestic responsibilities (ROSTAMI et al. 2024, SU & WU 2022, WILSON & LITTLE 2005). These constraints reflect broader patriarchal structures that limit women's mobility and access to leisure opportunities (YANG 2021). This section reviews the existing literature on female solo travel, focusing on three key themes: gendered constraints, intersectionality in tourism research, and the unique challenges faced by Muslim women travelers. These themes provide the foundation for the intersectional framework developed in Section 3.

Intersectionality, originally developed to address the marginalization of Black women (CRENSHAW 1991), has since been applied across disciplines to understand systems of oppression and strategies for combating inequality (COLLINS 2015). In tourism studies, intersectionality has been used to explore how overlapping identity factors—such as gender, religion, and class—shape travel experiences (MOONEY 2018, HIGGINS-DESBIOLLES 2020). For example, GAO & KERSTETTER (2016) demonstrate how the intersection of gender, age, and nationality influences Chinese women's perceptions of travel constraints. Similarly, LUTZ et al. (2016)

identify age as a significant axis in intersectionality, emphasizing how generational differences shape women's experiences of mobility. Despite its potential, the application of intersectionality in tourism research remains limited, particularly in the context of Muslim female solo travelers. This gap underscores the need for a comprehensive framework that captures the dynamic interactions between identity axes and their influence on women's mobility.

Muslim women face unique constraints in travel, including legal restrictions, cultural norms, and religious expectations. For example, in some Muslim-majority countries, women must travel with a male guardian, such as a father, brother, or husband (NISHA & CHEUNG 2022). While this practice is framed as a protective measure, it often restricts women's autonomy and ability to travel independently (TAVAKOLI & MURA 2017). In addition to legal and cultural constraints, Muslim women travelers often encounter geopolitical barriers, such as visa restrictions and Islamophobia, which further limit their mobility (MOUFAKKIR 2020, SEYFI et al. 2022). These challenges highlight the compounded nature of constraints faced by Muslim women, where multiple identity factors intersect to create unique barriers.

At the same time, variations in how Islamic rules are interpreted across Muslim-majority countries demonstrate the importance of context. For example, in Malaysia, women's mobility is shaped more by social and familial norms than by legal restrictions, allowing for greater flexibility in travel decisions (POOPALE RATTHINAN & SELAMAT 2018). In contrast, in conservative countries like Iran, legal obligations, such as requiring a husband's permission to travel, significantly constrain women's mobility (SEYFI & HALL 2019). These contextual differences underscore the need for an intersectional approach to understanding the constraints faced by Muslim female solo travelers.

The literature reviewed in this section highlights the need for a comprehensive framework that captures the intersectional dimensions of constraints on female solo travel, particularly in the Iranian context. While previous studies have explored individual constraints, such as gender-based risks (NEMATPOUR et al. 2024, WILSON & LITTLE 2005), legal restrictions (HOSSEINI et al. 2022, SEYFI & HALL 2019), or cultural norms (SALEHI et al. 2021), there is a lack of research that synthesizes these insights into a structured model that accounts for the compounded and context-specific nature of these barriers.

3 Towards a theoretical framework

MOONEY (2018), a feminist tourism scholar, highlights the importance of applying intersectionality across disciplines and specifically calls for its use in tourism research. Similarly, NISHA & CHEUNG (2022) and NISHA et al. (2025) stress the relevance of intersectionality in studying Muslim women's experiences in tourism. Despite this, empirical research on Muslim female solo travellers using an intersectional lens remains limited. This research addresses that gap by presenting a conceptual framework grounded in a review of existing literature. The proposed framework identifies ten key axes of identity, gender, education, employment, nationality, religion, place, marital status, ethnicity, age, and race, that shape the constraints faced by Muslim female solo travelers (Fig. 1). These axes were derived from a review of existing literature on women's leisure and solo travel (e.g., XIN et al. 2013, ALONSO-VAZQUEZ et al. 2024). Each axis represents a dimension of identity that interacts with others to create unique experiences of discrimination and constraint.

The framework builds on intersectionality theory, which explains how overlapping social identities create compounded and context-specific experiences of discrimination (CRENSHAW 1991). Originally developed to address the marginalization of Black women, intersectionality has since been applied across disciplines to understand broader systems of oppression (COLLINS 2015, HIGGINS-DESBIOLLES 2020, RODÓ-ZÁRATE 2020).

The interactions between the axes of identity are not static but vary significantly across different contexts, reflecting the influence of local, regional, and national conditions. These contextual variations demonstrate that the constraints on Muslim female solo travelers are not uniform but are deeply influenced by the interplay of local cultural norms, legal systems, political and socio-economic conditions.

3.1 An application to Iranian women's solo travel

The socio-economic and cultural context of Iranian women is marked by both significant pro-

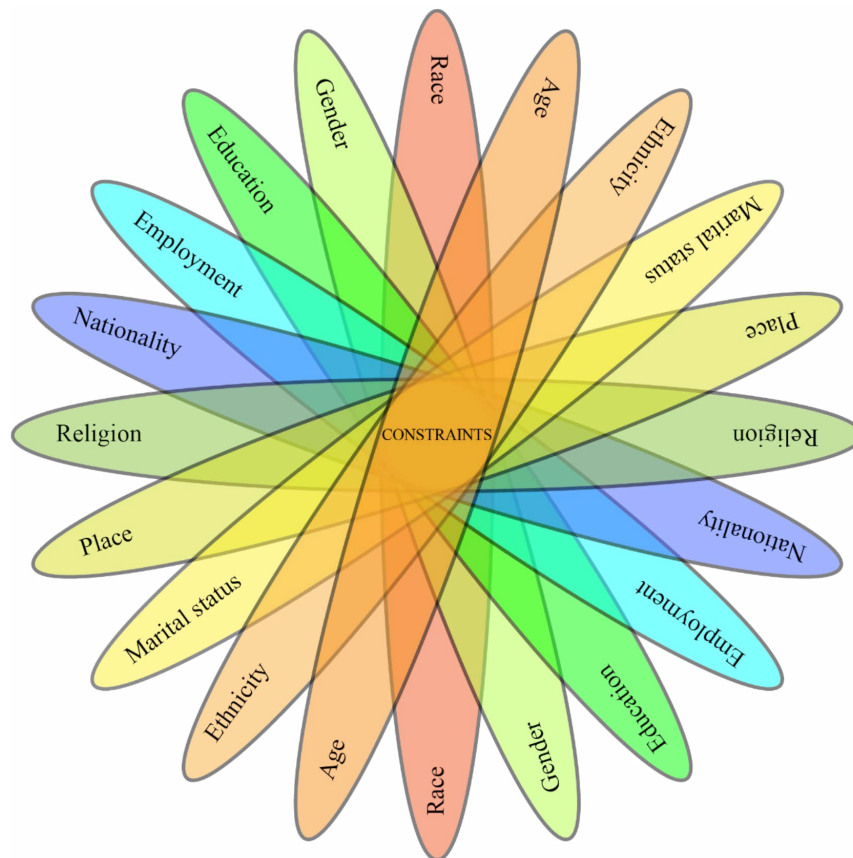


Fig. 1: Intersectional framework of constraints on female solo travelling

gress and persistent challenges, as illustrated in Table 1. While Iranian women have achieved high levels of educational attainment, with 60% of university students being female (2022), their labor force participation remains strikingly low at 13.4% (WORLD BANK 2025). This disparity reflects systemic barriers to economic empowerment, which limit women's financial independence and, by extension, their ability to travel (MOGHADAM 2023).

This contradictory condition related to the high rate of unemployment among educated women can be better understood by examining the political dimension of nationality. In Iran, the Islamic Republic promotes domestic responsibilities for women (ABEDINIFARD 2019) and emphasizes the sacred role of motherhood (KHARAZMI & GHASEMPOUR 2022), while prioritising the employment of men (MOGHADAM 2023). Also, economic sanctions linked to the regime's nuclear ambitions have led to high inflation (SHAHRYARI & ATHARI 2024), a decline in men's income, and increased financial dependency of housewives on male earners. As a result, many women have limited budgets for leisure or travel (REZANIA et al. 2021). Therefore, while the concept of class, mostly referring to the socioeconomic status

of individuals, holds a prominent place in most intersectionality studies (KONG & ZHU 2021), measurable concepts such as education and employment deserve more attention.

Similarly, while maternal healthcare indicators, such as a maternal mortality ratio of 16 deaths per 100,000 live births, suggest strong healthcare systems, women's political representation remains minimal, with only 4.8% of parliamentary seats held by women (WORLD BANK 2025). These statistics underscore the intersectional nature of constraints faced by Iranian women, where progress in one domain, such as education, is offset by challenges in others, such as employment and political participation.

Age is another critical axis of identity that shapes Iranian women's agency and mobility. Iran's recent history—including the Islamic Revolution (1978–1979), the Iran–Iraq War (1980–1988), and ongoing political upheavals—has created distinct generational experiences (KHAKI & GOUSIA 2015). Older generations of women, who lived through the Islamic Revolution and its immediate aftermath, may have internalized stricter patriarchal norms and are more likely to conform to traditional gender roles. In contrast, younger generations, particularly

Tab. 1: Iranian regional context of women's conditions

Titles		Statistics	References
Strengths of women's conditions	Live expectancy at birth	79.63 years	TRADING ECONOMICS 2025
	Maternal mortality ratio	16 deaths per 100000 live births	WORLD BANK (2025)
	Average number of births per woman (2022)	1.68	STATISTA (2025)
	Adult female literacy rate (age 15 and older (2022))	93%	WORLD BANK (2025)
	Female share of university students	60% (2022)	ATTA (2023)
Weaknesses of women's conditions	Labour force participation rate (age 15 and older)	13.4%	WORLD BANK (2025)
	Share of seats in parliament	4.8%	
Gender inequality index		0.482 (-0.001)	UNITED NATIONS DEVELOPMENT PROGRAMME (2024)

those born after the 1990s, have grown up in a more globalized and digitally connected world, which has exposed them to alternative gender norms and empowered some to challenge patriarchal constraints. Despite these shifts, structural barriers remain. For example, while the number of well-educated Iranian women has steadily increased, women now make up 60% of university students (ATTA 2023, MOGHADAM 2023). However, as illustrated above, their labor force participation remains disproportionately low. This limits their economic freedom and ability to travel independently. Studies in other Muslim societies suggest that young, educated women often use financial independence to challenge patriarchal norms through solo travel (NGUYEN & HSU 2022, POOPALE RATTHINAN & SELAMAT 2018). However, in Iran, even well-educated women face systemic barriers to employment, reflecting the intersection of age, education, and employment in shaping women's mobility.

Hence, Iranian women face unique and multifaceted constraints on solo travel, shaped by the intersection of sociocultural, legal, economic, and geopolitical factors. However, it is important to note that solo travel is not universally regarded as empowering or desirable among Iranian women. For some women, particularly those from religious or conservative backgrounds, solo travel may conflict with personal beliefs, family expectations, or concerns about safety and morality. Even among non-religious women, solo travel is not always perceived as freeing; some may find it financially infeasible, unpleasant, or hazardous. These diverse perspectives highlight that the experience of solo travel is highly context-dependent and shaped by intersecting identity factors, such as religion, socio-economic status, and family dynamics. Some studies on Muslim women have found that they enjoy travelling with family members, especially males (MOUFAKKIR 2020, POOPALE RATTHINAN & SELAMAT 2018, SEOW 2020). Indeed, beyond personal preferences, in Islam, women are encouraged to travel with a male guardian, such as a father, brother, son, or husband, who is expected to protect them from potential harm (NISHA & CHEUNG 2022).

Applying the proposed framework to the Iranian context highlights how the ten axes of identity, gender, education, employment, nationality, religion, place, marital status, ethnicity, age, and race, interact to create compounded and context-specific barriers. These constraints are deeply rooted in Iran's patriarchal social structure, restrictive legal frameworks, and the country's geopolitical position.

3.2 Dynamics of Intersectionality

The proposed framework emphasizes the dynamic and interdependent interactions between the ten axes of identity, which collectively shape the constraints faced by Muslim female solo travelers. These interactions are not static but evolve based on the socio-cultural, legal, and geopolitical contexts in which women travel. Below, we further discuss how specific axes intersect to create unique constraints (also see Tab. 2).

Gender roles and *marital status* intersect to create distinct legal and cultural barriers for women. Patriarchal norms in Iran emphasize women's caregiving roles and discourage mobility, particularly in rural areas (SALEHI et al. 2021). In many Muslim-majority societies, including Iran, married women are legally required to obtain their husbands' permission to travel abroad (SEYFI & HALL 2019). This legal restriction reflects patriarchal norms that prioritize male authority in family settings and demonstrates the intersection of gender and marital status. However, unmarried women are not exempt from constraints; they often face societal scrutiny and moral policing, as solo travel is perceived as inappropriate or unsafe for women. This intersection highlights how both legal frameworks and cultural expectations reinforce gendered constraints on mobility.

The intersection of *nationality* and *religion* shapes the experiences of Muslim women traveling abroad. Muslim women often encounter Islamophobia in non-Muslim countries, where they may be stereotyped or subjected to hostility due to their religious identity, including for wearing the Islamic dress (MOUFAKKIR 2020). For Iranian women, these challenges are compounded by Iranophobia, which manifests as heightened scrutiny and discriminatory treatment based on their nationality (MEHDIAN et al. 2022). NIKJOO et al. (2021) found that Iranian female solo travellers were often subjected to unfriendly and bigoted gazes in Western countries after disclosing their nationality—even when they did not wear the hijab. Race further (related to phenotypical attributes) complicates these experiences. For example, African-Iranians, who are visibly racially distinct (MIRZAI 2002), may face both racial and gender-based discrimination abroad. This underscores how the intersection of gender and race is a critical axis in understanding tourism mobility (CHAMBERS 2023, YANG et al. 2019). Iranian women travellers may therefore be subjected to racialized and sexualized stereotypes, as well as institutional discrimination, all of which contribute to disempowerment.

Tab. 2: Dynamics and contextual variations of female solo travel through an intersectional lens

Intersection	Description	Example
Gender and marital status	Legal and cultural barriers based on gender roles and marital status.	Married women in Iran require their husbands' permission to travel; unmarried women face scrutiny (SEYFI & HALL 2019).
Place and ethnicity	Stricter norms and limited infrastructure in rural areas; additional restrictions for ethnic minorities.	Rural women in Iran face limited mobility; Baluch and Kurdish women experience cultural restrictions (SALEHI et al. 2021, SHAKIBA et al. 2021, MOHAMMADI et al. 2022).
Nationality and religion	Discrimination based on religious identity and nationality, especially in international travel.	Iranian women face Islamophobia and Iranophobia abroad, including visa restrictions (NIKJOO et al. 2021, BIANCHI & STEPHENSON 2014).
Economic status and geopolitics	Financial dependency, sanctions, and visa restrictions limit mobility, especially for women in marginalized contexts.	Iranian women face financial constraints due to low labor force participation and sanctions; visa rejections and lack of access to international banking further restrict travel (TAHERI et al. 2021, BIANCHI & STEPHENSON 2014, SEYFI et al. 2022).
Urban vs. rural setting	Differences in mobility based on access to resources and societal attitudes.	Urban women in Iran have more opportunities for travel compared to rural women (NIKJOO et al. 2025, SALEHI et al. 2021).
Comparative context	Variability in constraints across countries with different legal and cultural frameworks.	Malaysian women face social norms but no legal restrictions; Saudi women benefit from recent legal reforms (POOPALE RATTHINAN & SELAMAT 2018, NISHA & CHEUNG 2022).

Geopolitical barriers further constrain Iranian women's mobility, particularly in the context of international travel. Iranian passport holders must apply for visas to enter more than 142 countries (IRAN PASSPORT DASHBOARD 2023), often facing strict visa regulations and high rejection rates, especially from Western nations (GARON 2023, SEYFI et al. 2022). These restrictions are compounded by economic sanctions, which have devalued the Iranian currency and reduced women's financial resources for travel. Political concerns also affect Iranian women during international travel. For instance, the lack of access to international online banking increases the risk of financial insecurity abroad, raising fears of losing property or funds (SEYFI et al. 2022, WILSON & LITTLE 2005). BIANCHI & STEPHENSON (2014) argue that such political restrictions disproportionately affect marginalized groups, including women, by curtailing their freedom of movement and access to leisure. The intersection of nationality and geopolitical tensions is a critical axis in understanding the constraints faced by Iranian women. These intersecting axes highlight how geopolitical tensions and religious biases create unique constraints for Iranian women in international travel.

Economic barriers significantly constrain Iranian women's ability to travel independently. Despite im-

provements in women's education, their participation in the labor force remains disproportionately low, with many women facing systemic barriers to employment (TAHERI et al. 2021). This economic dependency limits women's financial resources for leisure and travel, especially those in rural areas with strong patriarchal norms or from lower socio-economic backgrounds, where men often resist women's economic empowerment (NIKJOO et al. 2025). For example, women who are financially dependent on male family members may lack the autonomy to allocate resources for travel, reflecting the intersection of gender, employment, and socio-economic status. Economic sanctions and high inflation have further exacerbated these financial constraints. Sanctions linked to Iran's geopolitical position have devalued the Iranian currency, reduced household incomes, and increased the financial dependency of women on male earners (SHAHRYARI & ATHARI 2024). These economic challenges are compounded by geopolitical barriers, such as strict visa regulations and high rejection rates for Iranian passport holders, particularly in Western countries (BIANCHI & STEPHENSON 2014, GARON 2023). Iranian women traveling abroad also face the lack of access to international banking systems, which increases the risk of financial insecurity during travel (SEYFI et al. 2022). These

constraints reflect the intersection of nationality, religion, and geopolitical tensions, which uniquely shape the travel experiences of Iranian women.

3.3 Contextual variations

The interactions between identity axes are not uniform but vary significantly across different socio-cultural and geopolitical contexts. These variations demonstrate the importance of analyzing constraints within specific settings to understand their compounded effects.

Place of residence and *ethnicity* intersect to amplify constraints for women in rural areas and minority ethnic groups. Women in *urban* areas, such as Tehran, often have greater access to financial resources, education, and social networks that facilitate travel. Urban environments may also offer more progressive attitudes toward women's mobility, reducing societal scrutiny. In contrast, rural women face stricter patriarchal norms, limited infrastructure, and fewer economic opportunities, which significantly constrain their ability to travel independently (NIKJOO et al. 2025, SALEHI et al. 2021, ZAREZADEH & RASTEGAR 2023). For example, rural women may lack access to public transportation or face community disapproval for traveling alone, reflecting the compounded effects of place and socio-economic status.

Meanwhile, Iran is home to six dominant ethnicities, each possessing distinct socio-cultural characteristics: Arab, Baluchi, Fars, Kurdish, Lor, and Turkish communities (MIRMOHAMMADI et al. 2013). Subsequently, for certain ethnic minorities, such as the Baluch and Kurdish communities in Iran, cultural traditions and discriminatory practices further limit women's mobility. These groups may impose additional restrictions on women's dress, behavior, and participation in public life, compounding the barriers faced by rural women (MOHAMMADI et al. 2022, SHAKIBA et al. 2021, ZAREZADEH & RASTEGAR 2023). Similarly, the intersection of place and ethnicity intensifies constraints for women in rural areas, particularly those from minority ethnic groups. In these settings, conservative community norms and ethnic traditions emphasize caregiving roles and discourage women's mobility, especially for leisure or tourism purposes (SALEHI et al. 2021, ZAREZADEH & RASTEGAR 2023). These regional and ethnic disparities underscore the importance of examining the intersectional and context-specific nature of constraints on women's

mobility, rather than treating Iranian women as a homogenous group.

The constraints faced by Muslim female solo travelers also vary across countries with different legal and cultural frameworks. In Malaysia, women's mobility is shaped more by social and familial norms than by legal restrictions, allowing for greater flexibility in travel decisions (POOPALE RATTHINAN & SELAMAT 2018). For instance, while women may still face societal expectations to travel with male family members, there are no legal requirements for male guardianship. Conversely, in Saudi Arabia, recent legal reforms have expanded women's rights to travel without male guardianship, signaling a shift in the intersection of gender and legal frameworks (NISHA & CHEUNG 2022). These examples illustrate how the same identity axes, such as gender and religion, can produce different constraints depending on the socio-legal context.

These contextual variations demonstrate the framework's applicability across diverse settings. By identifying the ten axes of identity and their dynamic interactions, the framework provides a structured approach to analyzing the constraints faced by Muslim female solo travelers. It also highlights the need for context-specific analyses, as the nature and intensity of these constraints vary across different socio-cultural and geopolitical environments.

4 Conclusion and implications

In this research, we discussed a conceptual framework for understanding the constraints faced by Muslim female solo travelers, with a focus on Iranian women. By synthesizing existing literature and identifying ten key axes of identity, the study provides a theoretical foundation for future empirical research. While this study does not include firsthand accounts, its primary contribution lies in advancing theoretical understanding and offering a structured approach for exploring the intersectional dimensions of women's mobility. The framework demonstrates how these axes intersect and influence each other, creating compounded and context-specific barriers. For example, the intersection of gender and marital status reinforces patriarchal norms through legal restrictions, while the intersection of nationality and religion exposes women to Islamophobia and Iranophobia during international travel.

The intersectional approach enables new insights by moving beyond single-axis analyses to reveal how overlapping identity factors dynamically

interact to shape women's mobility. For instance, the framework highlights how geopolitical tensions, such as economic sanctions and visa restrictions, intersect with socio-cultural norms to uniquely constrain Iranian women's international travel. These insights underscore the importance of considering nationality and geopolitical factors, which are often overlooked in tourism research. The framework also proposes more precise categories, such as employment and education, instead of the broader concept of class, allowing for a more nuanced understanding of socio-economic constraints.

Applying the framework to the Iranian context reveals how sociocultural norms, legal restrictions, economic dependency, geopolitical barriers, and historical factors interact to limit women's opportunities for solo travel. This study contributes to the growing body of literature on intersectionality in tourism and offers a foundation for future empirical research. NISHA & CHEUNG (2022) underscore the importance of applying intersectionality in tourism research on Muslim women. However, this study's framework, with its context-specific and interlocked axes, demonstrates the need to identify intersectional dimensions tailored to each research setting. Such an approach enables a deeper understanding of Muslim women's diverse solo travel experiences and can contribute to advancing women's empowerment.

While this study focuses on Iranian women, the framework has the potential to be applied in a comparative manner to other Muslim-majority contexts or marginalized groups. For example, future research could explore how the constraints faced by Muslim women in Southeast Asia or the Middle East differ based on variations in legal systems, cultural norms, and geopolitical conditions. Future research is also encouraged to empirically apply and refine this proposed framework through qualitative methods, such as interviews or ethnographic studies, to capture the lived experiences of Iranian women and other Muslim female solo travelers. Such studies would provide deeper insights into how intersecting identity factors shape their mobility and further validate the framework's applicability across diverse contexts.

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Authors

Afsaneh Rostami

ORCID: 0009-0004-1185-6207

email: afsaneh.r@mail.sunway.edu.my

School of Hospitality and Service Management

Sunway University

Malaysia

Dr. Alexander Trupp

ORCID: 0000-0003-1093-2824

email: alexander.trupp@uibk.ac.at

Department of Geography

University of Innsbruck

Austria